

# Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos An Introduction

By

Mary Luciana Lombardi, Ph.D.

Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos (1886-1966) was a “complete musician with intelligence and talent.” She was well known, admired, and respected in Brazil and abroad during her lifetime. As composer, she wrote music to support the national program for teaching music to all children, for the choral ensembles she founded and directed, and with and for her husband, Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959). As concert artist, she presented solo piano and chamber music recitals; reviewers admired her performances as “excellent, extraordinary and virtuosic” with splendid technique and sensitive interpretations. Nonetheless, histories of Brazilian music and culture rarely acknowledge her many contributions, and she is missing from biographies of her husband. The purpose of this brief biography of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos and of the Online Edition of *Cantar é Viver (To Sing Is To Live)* is offer a perspective on her many contributions and to contribute to collections and studies of music by individual composers within the historical and social contexts of music-making.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup>

## Her First Fifty Years (1886-1936)

Lucilia Guimaraes was born on May 26, 1886, the first of three girls and four boys, to José Guimarães and Ludelina Pita de Oliveira Guimarães in Paraíba do Sul, a town north of the city of Rio de Janeiro, formerly Brazil's capital. Her mother was a pianist who taught several of her children. The family moved to the city where she studied at the national conservatory (called variously Music Institute and School), earning two diplomas: a gold medal and the highest honor of "brilliant"-- in solfeggio and chorale song in 1900 and a diploma in piano in 1907. Five years later, her professional career was well established; she gave private piano and voice lessons, and taught at the Colégio Sacré-Cour. At that time, according to her family, she rarely wrote down any of her pieces because she had "no pretension to greatness." When she was introduced to Heitor Villa-Lobos by a family friend in 1912, they played chamber music at their first meeting and subsequent dates. In her "Minhas Memórias" she wrote that "the repeated contacts, the artistic affinity, and a natural and growing attraction culminated in our engagement." They continued to make music after their marriage in 1913, and he moved into her home with her brothers and sisters. Lucília and Heitor Villa-Lobos had no children, but their home, at Rua Didimo No. 10 in the center of Rio de Janeiro, welcomed their extended family members, musicians, writers, visual artists, friends, students, and patrons.<sup>3, 4</sup>

The evidence shows that the years between 1913 and 1936 were filled with enjoyment, productivity, and stimulation for both Lucília and Heitor Villa-Lobos as they worked together. She applied her intelligence, talents, and skills to his ideas and interests, and found expression of her own creativity while supporting his. He called her “the animator of my ideal, and the major fighter for it.” That epoch might have been his “most important creative years,” as some scholars have written, but the “decisive and important role” of his wife remains poorly recognized. Soon after their marriage, before he could play the piano, she wrote piano pieces for him to submit to the conservatory’s piano repertoire course. In her memoirs, she wrote “it was I who made the first partial executions,” and it was well-known that at least two of the pieces submitted to the conservatory were “entirely of her authorship,” although “she never boasted of this.” His first attempts to compose for the piano were largely unplayable “if one didn’t wish to use the nose or a third hand,” and he was “never more than a barely adequate pianist.” He often asked her to demonstrate the “authorized” way to play “his” music to other pianists. If they did not consult with the Villa-Lobos couple before their concerts, he would declare that “his” creations had been “mutilated,” and ask, “Why didn’t they come to hear me?” Clearly, he meant: why didn’t they come to hear his wife, Lucília Villa-Lobos, play the music. During these encounters, according to her siblings, she “always demonstrated great humility, afraid that she might wound the other concert artists’ sensitivities.” To credit him with sole

authorship of the compositions for piano is surely an exaggeration. If the piano music presents “an originality of technical solutions,” and “may be considered one of the significant points in the evolution of modern pianistic music,” as some have suggested, then it appears clear that the first works for solo piano to appear under his name are actually “joint creations with Lucília,” and “if she had not been so very modest and lacking in egotism, her career as a composer could have been major.” During the years they lived and worked together, the name of Lucília Villa-Lobos was “linked indissolubly” with that of Heitor Villa-Lobos’s.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

A few anecdotal stories illustrate how they composed together.

- When her husband proposed something he thought suitable for a (slow) *Ave Maria*, Lucília Villa-Lobos made it a (very fast) *Tarantella*; that piece became “his” Op. 30, for two pianos and she was one of the pianists for the first performance in 1917 in Rio de Janeiro.
- Often, when her brothers and sisters watched him delay preparing scores or parts until the last minute, finally, his wife would do it for him, editing for form, and for content.
- When he expressed interest in attempting formal study (for the second time) at the National Music School in Rio de Janeiro, “everyone knew” that she had written the entry compositions for him. He had attempted to study harmony and composition there in 1907, but left, he said, because the teaching was “too restraining” with “routine methods.” His difficulties with formal structure

continued throughout his life; some write that the “self-taught musician too often emerges to cast a shadow over” the music, and the fundamental deficiency of his lack of formal training shows “even in his most mature works.”

- Lucília Villa-Lobos influenced her husband’s uses of popular tunes by singing the melodies for him. Although he claimed that he derived the songs from expeditions he made into the Brazilian interior and the Northeast between 1905 and 1912, musicologists state that the “total body” of his work “does not contain one single theme that he collected by himself, nor did he bring back to Rio any folkloristic material worthy of the name.” One scholar noted that the *Bachianas Brasileiras*, which were not published until 1942, “seem to be a leftover from his Parisian sojourn (1927-1930) where the neo-classic, in those days, was so en vogue.” In their apartment abroad, they composed and performed together, as always. Her name surely belongs on that music as well as on the piano and chamber music composed earlier.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

Because all of the original manuscripts have disappeared, definitive proof through holographic document analysis of their composing together between 1912 and 1936 is impossible. Heitor Villa-Lobos said that he wanted to create “deliberate disorder about his dates of composition and his personal life in order to make a name for himself that would be as original and different from others as possible.” He hoped to “leave the world after him in confusion

over the controversy,” and expected that many would consider his behavior as “part of his charm.” He also may have realized that analysis of the original manuscripts from the years he and Lucília Villa-Lobos worked together would reveal how much his wife composed with and for him.<sup>3,4</sup>

In addition to composing with and for her husband, Lucília Villa-Lobos gave him her artistry, faith, and approval, as well as cooperation and courage as a performer. She functioned in the role of “official interpreter,” and helped him with the earliest stages of conception and notation to the final steps of revising the music for public performance. She presented many first performances at private recitals held in aristocratic salons in Rio de Janeiro and the city of São Paulo, and in public venues throughout Brazil and foreign cities. Her efforts to promote his success also included performing at concerts of “modern” music during the years when audiences were actively hostile, irritated, and aggressive in their responses, especially during the Modern Art Week in São Paulo in 1922. She and the other musicians presenting the “new” music, not the composers, were the ones who experienced the brunt of an angry public during that epoch. Audiences apparently feared the cultural ferment of the Modernist movement as a “threat to the traditional conservative and conformist spirit,” and felt it “affronted general opinion.”

In the years after the excitement of the Modern Art Week, most of the leading visual artists, writers and musicians spent time in Europe, as did Lucília and Heitor Villa-Lobos. Their expenses, of travel to and three years (1927-1930) residence in France, came from aristocratic patrons who had also helped support them at home in Rio de Janeiro. In their apartment in Paris, she demonstrated “his” piano pieces in order “to make them known to the numerous musical personalities that would come to diffuse his name within the European milieu within a little time.” She performed solo piano and chamber music on Parisian stages, receiving positive reviews, including one long article dedicated to her. In Brazil in 1931, together with other instrumentalists and singers known as “the best performing artists” of the time, Lucília Villa-Lobos “campaigned strongly” for her husband, participating in an ambitious marathon excursion to fifty-four cities within the state of São Paulo; she was the only one of the ensemble to take part in all of the recitals.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Although the evidence demonstrates the significance of her contributions to Brazilian music and culture, the work of Lucília Villa-Lobos remains unrecognized in most sources, whether biographies of her husband or histories of Brazilian music and musicians. In some sources, the names of all other performers at events where she performed appear, but hers does not. Her name is missing as well from the lists, represented as complete, of first performers and persons to whom he dedicated his music. Since there

is no doubt that Lucília Villa-Lobos was the first to perform much of his music, it appears likely that her name was intentionally omitted from these lists. Indicative of a deliberate attempt to minimize her role, the name Lucília Villa-Lobos does not appear on lists referencing social events such as dinner parties for which she was the hostess, even though the lists include the names of every other person involved, including the maid. Her siblings, with whom the couple lived, remember that Heitor Villa-Lobos dedicated more than one piece to her, but only one example survives: “*À Lucília Villa-Lobos*” is printed at the top of the piano music, *Próle do Bêbé, No. 1* (Rio de Janeiro, Casa Arthur Napoleão Músicas, 1930) and is reproduced on the cover of *Villa-Lobos: Visto da platéia e na intimidade*.<sup>3,4</sup>

The manuscript evidence of the contributions Lucília Villa-Lobos made to music published under her husband’s name may be lost, but during her lifetime, as well as after her death, many agreed that it is impossible to separate her contributions from those of her husband. “She was an artist and master of her vocation.” Although much of her musical contribution cannot be separated from the work her husband claimed as his own, some of her compositions do still exist, as described in the next section.<sup>3,7</sup>

## Her Last Thirty Years (1936-1966)

From the beginning of the national music program in 1930, created and developed by Lucília and Heitor Villa-Lobos, she was the Master Teacher (“*A Mestre das Mestras*”) who taught the many choral conductors needed for the program to succeed. She was recognized for her expertise in training voices to sing in tune, with precise diction, attention to posture and breathing, and how to follow the director. She also contributed to that program by writing more than 160 songs, published as a posthumous honor in the First Edition of *Cantar é Viver* (Rio de Janeiro, 1972-77) by three of her former teaching colleagues.

They collected and organized her original songs and arrangements of popular, folk, patriotic, and religious songs into six volumes for beginning through intermediate levels, for ensembles of two to four parts, and for solo voice and piano. Their introduction to that collection explained that although much of the “extensive” musical legacy of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos has been lost, “what we have will help current professors who work in choral music.” They admired her music because “it can be sung by future generations with the same pleasure with which her contemporaries had the privilege of interpreting them.” She composed “inspired melodies,” they wrote, that “could be explored in such a personal way, sometimes using innovative sonorities, and sometimes with expressive word painting, that she could profoundly touch, and even

galvanize entire theater audiences.” Her music, “especially when presented by vocal ensembles prepared by her, provided vivid moments of pure art.” One of her beautiful melodies, *Hymn to the Brazilian Sun*, a two-voice melodic canon with dramatic effects of crescendo and diminuendo (Vol. 1, no. 1), appealed to audiences from its first appearance in the 1932 concert presenting the idea of teaching choral music in schools, remaining popular for more than three decades. Her husband programmed it for a concert at the Congress for Popular Music Education in Prague in 1936 when a chorus of eighty children learned to sing it in Portuguese within one week.<sup>1,3</sup>

The work of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos as a choral conductor is well-documented.<sup>1,3</sup> She worked with children, young adults, and music teachers in many contexts throughout the years. During the 1930s, until 1945, she taught children from orphanages and from the poor neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, providing shoes and clothing as necessary. She named her *Ápiacás* chorus at Rádio Tupí to honor the Indian tribe known for their strength and bravery before they became extinct. That chorus was sponsored by Laurinda Santos Lobo, one of the patrons who had supported her work with her husband in the 1920s. At Rádio Tupí and Rádio Nacional, her choruses were heard in broadcasts and seen on concert tours throughout Brazil, and in a broadcast to the United States in December of 1942. In 1939, at the request of Rádio El Mundo in

Buenos Aires, she composed a military march, "Salutations to the Argentine Republic." In the 1950s Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos led the Voices of Brazil ensemble as Artistic Supervisor, and composed and arranged music for its membership of fifteen women music professors who performed without a conductor. Their concerts in Rio de Janeiro at the Teatro Municipal and on Rádio Roquette Pinto were sponsored by the newspaper, *O Globo*, and the Ministry of Education; they also performed in Petrópolis, Teresópolis and other locales. In November of 1954 the Voices of Brazil performed several of her works in a concert for young people sponsored by the Brazilian Symphonic Orchestra. In 1956, 1957 and 1958, with her choruses from the Orsina da Fonseca School in Rio de Janeiro, she traveled to her hometown of Paraíba do Sul where her concerts were enthusiastically received. She was honored in July of 1964, at the invitation of the Paraíba do Sul Lions' Club, to give the opening address to a conference about Brazil's National Hymn. In January of 1965 in Paraíba do Sul with a new chorus, Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos presented such a successful concert, with so many ovations and accolades, that a second performance had to be given immediately after the first. She was presented with flowers and several honors, including a silver tuning fork, a commemorative plaque, and the title of "Honorary Citizen of the City of Paraíba do Sul." A recording was made of those performances, originally issued on LP, now available [online](#). She had hoped to retire to that city, but died before she could on May 25, 1966, the day before her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## Historical Context and Personal Relationships

Brazil is the only Latin American country that derives its language and culture from Portugal; colonization began in 1532 and it became a royal colony in 1549. Also unusual was its experience of a relatively smooth transition to independence. In 1808 King João and the Portuguese court moved to Rio de Janeiro to avoid the Napoleonic Wars, remaining in residence until 1820. Two years later, his son, Prince Pedro I became emperor and declared Independence from Portugal; he abdicated in 1831, making his five-year-old son regent. In 1840 Pedro II became emperor of Brazil and was popular until the 1889 military revolt after which he abdicated, and a Republic was proclaimed. Another military revolt in 1930 brought Getúlio Vargas to power, his dictatorship lasted until 1954; since then, Brazilian governments have experienced both civilian leaders and other military dictatorships.

From its founding, Brazil has been a patriarchal society, with a double moral and legal standard for women and men. The reasons given are well known: the control of property transmissions, the influence of Roman Catholic religious values, and the difficulties of frontier conditions with long periods of imbalance in the ratio of males to females. Society expected men to demonstrate their masculinity and proper women to remain virgins until marriage and

to remain faithful to their husbands under all circumstances. As with other patriarchal societies, women had few rights. Slavery was abolished (1888) long before women became equal to men for all legal purposes. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women began to have access to schools and employment, but they could not vote until 1932, and divorce was illegal until 1977.<sup>8</sup>

The neglect of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos's work in histories of Brazilian music and culture might reflect in part the situation created by the illegality of divorce during their lifetimes. When Lucília and Heitor Villa-Lobos married, she was a devout Roman Catholic and believed marriage was a lifetime commitment. He, evidently, had different ideas, and in mid-1936 wrote to her that he would be moving out of their home upon his return to Rio de Janeiro from Berlin. She was understandably dismayed, and wrote back to him that his "last letter has caused me surprise and very great offense." She reminded him that as his wife and most loyal supporter for all their years together, she had always been his "sincere companion and collaborator." Furthermore, despite his "apparent animosity," she still felt "devotion" towards him, and had always "encouraged interest" in his work and "made it known in every post I hold, even though you are not there to see it." She could not understand his "outrageous and absurd decision" because he had enjoyed "*absolute liberty*" in his activities (emphasis in original).<sup>6</sup> Her feelings after he left can be seen in the change of her motto from: "To

Sing Is To Live” to “Nowadays, I live for God and for Music.” (In 1977, on a blue ribbon won by the Paraíba do Sul “Harmonia” Chorus, they printed both her second motto and a revision: “Today She Belongs to God and Her Music Lives for Us.”<sup>10</sup>)

In Brazil where divorce was illegal, when marriages ended and both spouses agreed, sometimes a legal separation was possible. Even when such a legal separation document was obtained, new relationships were called “informal marriages.” Under these circumstances, however, Lucília and Heitor Villa-Lobos did not separate with her consent, as some have written, and she did not agree to a legal separation. During the last years of his life, he asked the woman with whom he lived, Arminda Neves de Almeida (1912-1985), to recopy his music. After his death, she became the director of the Villa-Lobos Museum in Rio de Janeiro, and was responsible for organizing the scores (in manuscript and printed form), the music recordings, and preparing what she called a complete chronological lists of his works, their first performances and performers, and to whom dedicated. The name of Lucília Villa-Lobos rarely appeared in those lists, as discussed above. Arminda de Almeida also commissioned, edited, and published a series of hagiographic essays about the life and times of Heitor Villa-Lobos, but minimizing and rarely mentioning the role of Lucília Villa-Lobos, although sometimes referring to her as his wife without naming her. Nonetheless, the name of Arminda de Almeida appears frequently.<sup>4,9</sup> In 1977 when

divorce finally became legal in Brazil, Arminda changed her surname to Villa-Lobos through the Deed Poll process. . Nonetheless, her attitude until her death in 1985 appears to have remained angry, resentful, and perhaps jealous towards her husband's first and only legal wife (both Heitor and Lucília Villa-Lobos died before Arminda de Almeida could legally call herself "wife"). When American scholars requested information about Lucília Villa-Lobos at the Villa-Lobos Museum in the early 1980s, animosity filled the air when her name was mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

In his will, Heitor Villa-Lobos bequeathed 50% of his estate to his wife, Lucília Villa-Lobos, and 50% to the National Music School, subject to the condition that they pass on part of it to Arminda de Almeida until her death. Since probate of his estate took more than 35 years before being settled, only his first wife's last surviving brother Oldemar Guimarães benefited; he donated his sister's manuscripts and other materials to the Villa-Lobos Museum in Rio de Janeiro in 1995.

The absence of Heitor Villa-Lobos from the last thirty years of the life of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos allowed some of the music she composed to survive--in the First Edition of *Cantar é Viver*.<sup>1</sup> If she had continued to live with him, it is likely that they would have followed the practice of placing his name alone on music they

composed together, leaving only anecdotal and analytical musicological evidence of her contributions.

Her work as performer and conductor is, as discussed above, well documented.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Brazil's musical and cultural history, however, requires revision to reflect the contribution of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos and, likely similar contributions of other lesser-known women artists. Many writers have confused and conflated the names and activities of Lucília and Arminda, based in part on inaccurate information in biographical dictionaries.<sup>12</sup> The material included here serves to highlight the many contributions of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos that have remained largely unknown and underappreciated.

---

## Sources

Note: [links to many materials related to the life and work of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos](http://musicandwords.net/lucilia052008.html) appear on the site: *Cantar é Viver* at <http://musicandwords.net/lucilia052008.html>

<sup>1</sup> *First Edition of Cantar é Viver*: Music by Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos (Rio de Janeiro; 6 volumes (1972-77)).

<sup>2</sup> *Online Edition of Cantar é Viver/To Sing Is To Live*: A representative selection of 28 songs by Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos from the *First Edition*, with facsimile piano-vocal scores, lyrics translated into English from the Portuguese, extensive notes and sources, and a few tracks from rare live concert recordings made in 1965 and 1999 (musicandwords.net).

<sup>3</sup> *Villa-Lobos: Visto da plateia e na intimidade 1912 / 1935*. Edited and compiled by Luiz Guimarães, e colaboradores: Oldemar Guimarães, Dinorah Guimarães Campos, Álvaro de Oliveira Guimarães (Rio de Janeiro, 1972). Contents: excerpts from "Minhas Memórias," by Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos,

transcriptions and reproductions of concert programs and reviews, commentary by her brothers and sisters, obituaries and posthumous articles, photos and more.

<sup>4</sup> *Women in the Modern Art Movement in Brazil, 1917-1930*, by Mary [Luciana] Lombardi, Ph.D. dissertation (University of California Los Angeles, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> "The Fifteen-Year-Periods in Villa-Lobos's Life," by Lisa M. Peppercorn, *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv*, 5(2), 1979, 179-97; also in her *Villa-Lobos, Collected Studies* (Hampshire, England, Brookfield, Vermont, Scholar Press, 1992, 69-88).

<sup>6</sup> "Correspondence between Heitor Villa-Lobos and His Wife Lucília," edited by Lisa M. Peppercorn, *Music and Letters*, 61(3/4), July/October 1980, 284-292; also in her *Villa-Lobos, Collected Studies* (Hampshire, England, Brookfield, Vermont, Scholar Press, 1992, 123-132).

<sup>7</sup> Many husbands (brothers, fathers) have claimed music written by their wives (sisters, daughters); details can be found in *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, edited by Julie Anne Sadie & Rhian Samuel (Macmillan, 1994). Notable recent research suggests that Anna Magdalena Bach composed the Cello Suites attributed to her husband, Johann Sebastian Bach: *Did Johann Sebastian Bach write the Six Cello Suites?* by Martin W. B. Jarvis (Ph.D. Thesis, Charles Darwin University, Australia, 2007); "The Application of Forensic Document Examination Techniques to the Writings of J. S. Bach and A. M. Bach," by Martin W. B. Jarvis (*Understanding Bach*, 3, 87-92 ©Bach Network UK 2008; accessed November 24, 2008: <http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/ub3/JARVIS%20-%20YSF.pdf>)

<sup>8</sup> We mention here only the women's rights in Brazil specific to the life and work of Lucília Guimarães Villa-Lobos. For a comprehensive history of the subject: *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* by Francesca Miller (Hanover & London University Press of New England, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> *Á Presença de Villa-Lobos*; 12 volumes (Rio de Janeiro, 1965-1981).

<sup>10</sup> Program and Blue Ribbon from Collection of M. L. Lombardi.

<sup>11</sup> Personal Correspondence of M. L. Lombardi.

<sup>12</sup> *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*, edited by Aaron Cohen (New York, 1987); *Dicionário biobibliográfico de mulheres ilustres, notáveis e intelectuais do Brasil*, by Adalzira Bittencourt (Rio de Janeiro, Pongetti, 1969-72).